DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 713 HE 022 677

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TITLE The Department Chair: A Descriptive Study.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Convention (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrators; College Faculty; *Department Heads; Higher Education; Meetings; School Administration; Time Management

ABSTRACT

Information is presented on a study which investigated the managerial role of the academic department chair and compared it to a study of traditional managers. The study compared management activities to determine whether or not there was a difference between academic management and management outside of the university setting. It made use of the structured observation method of Mintzberg to document the actions of a department chair in an academic university. In addition to 9 days of structured observation, the study included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the person being studied and two chairs from other departments along with time logs from 2 days when the subject of the study was working outside of the office. The subject was a chair of a Department of Educational Administration and Supervision in a major research university. The study looked at the amount of time in minutes spent on five incidents (scheduled meetings, unscheduled meetings, phone calls, tours, and desk work). Results include the following: one of the main frustrations of academics who attempt to perform the administrative role is the very limited amount of uninterrupted desk work; time concerns weigh heavily on all department chairs; time spent in scheduled meetings is not usually rewarding to university department chairs; and 6% of their time is spent on phone calls. Tables are included. Contains 27 references. (SM)

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The Department Chair:

A Descriptive Study

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Presented to the American Educational Research Convention
San Francisco, California, March, 1989

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Introduction

The role of the academic department chair at the four-year college and university is one of paradox. He or she must perform administrative duties and is often without training or experience in administration. The chairperson is trained as an academic but must often put that aside as the demands of the role of chair increase. In addition, the chair needs to interpret between the administration and faculty. Caplow and McGee (1958) liken it to the job of foreman in industry.

> In order to function as a chairman, he must represent management to the boys in the shop, and the boys in the shop to management. In the chairman's case, his orientation to his discipline usually puts him closer to the boys in the shop. The chairman's ability to carry out his duties, however, may depend on his closeness to management. (195)

The incumbent of the job primarily sees himself or herself as a scholar who, out of a sense of duty is temporarily reponsible for the administrative tasks of the department to allow the others in the department to get on with their true work (Milstein, 1987). While the position of academic chairperson should be one of leadership with responsibilities for program development and renewal, those accepting the position come without leadership training, without a clear understanding of the role ambiguity, and without the awareness of the cost to their

academic career and personal lives (Creswell, 1986). The administrative aspect of the role of the department chair has increased over the years and tends to become more difficult in times of economic constraint (Middlebrook, 1986). The chair must act as administrator, interpret between the administration and faculty, and fulfull the academic role simultaneously.

The managerial role of the academic department chair is unique because it is part time, because it occurs in an academic setting, and because the chair often comes to the role untrained. Yet is the actual managerial work which the chair performs unique to the academic setting?

This paper is the report of a study which investigated the managerial role of the department chair and compared it to a study of traditional managers. It compared management activities to determine whether or not there was a difference between academic management and management outside of the university setting.

An effective description of what non-academic managers actually do is contained in The Nature of Managerial Work by Henry Mintzberg (1973). The book, based on a study of five managers, describes the roles they play. Three of the subjects in Mintzberg's study were in the private sector, one managed a hospital and the fifth was the superintendent of a large school system.

Method

The present study made use of the structured observation method of Mintzberg to document the actions of a department chair in an academic university. In addition to eight days of structured observation, the study included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the subject of the study and two chairs from other departments along with time logs from two days when the subject of the study was working outside of the office. One of the days logged was a Friday when the chair stayed home to work on a writing project and came into the office for only a short time. The other was a day in which the chair traveled to a meeting by air and returned to the office late in the afternoon.

The subject of the study was a chair of a department of Educational Administration and Supervision in a major research university. At the time the study began, he was beginning his third year as department chair.

The department is made up of nine faculty members. Three of the nine professors in the department have split appointments: two are half-time members of the department and the third is on a courtesy appointment. All but the newest is tenured and seven are full professors.

The department is a graduate department with 140 students, approximately 30 of whom study on campus. The

average age of students in the department is 40 and many are returning to school after nearly a score of years of experience in the public schools. These graduate students previously held positions as public school teachers, principals, and central office personnel. The university is 70 miles from the nearest urban area but a number of students commute to classes after a full day's work from the city or the small towns surrounding the institution. To accomodate the commuting students, classes are scheduled in the late afternoon and evening. All classes are scheduled to meet once weekly from 4:10 to 7:00 pm or 7:10 to 10:00 pm. A full schedule of summer school classes is also offered.

The structured observation was conducted over eight days when the chair was in his office. Six of the eight days were considered by the chair to be "typical" days. Two of the days, which were considered "atypical", were the first two days after the department chair had returned from consulting overseas. On the first of these days, the chair was not officially "in" and, therefore, no meetings were scheduled. All eight days of observation were used in the study.

In Mintzberg's study (1973) five executives were each observed, each for a one week period. The method of structured observation was used. From a pre-study,

Mintzberg discovered that the manager's work falls into five categories: scheduled meetings, telephone calls, uncheduled meetings, tours, and desk work. He used those categories to conduct the structured observation, and to record purpose, time, duration, and a description of each activity. The present study used these same categories slightly redefined in relation to the work of the department chair. Because of the cyclical nature of the academic calendar, eight days in September, January, and February were chosen for observation. The two atypical days were September 20 and 21, 1988 and the typical days were January 11, 12 and 16 and February 1, 6, and 8, 1989.

A scheduled meeting referred to a meeting that was on the calendar when the day began. The time recorded was the time actually spent in the meeting rather than the time scheduled. Meetings that fell into this definition were typically department meetings, meetings of the department chairs in the college, meetings scheduled by university level administration and individual meetings with faculty, students, and prospective students.

Telephone calls included both initiated and received calls and the timing referred to the nearest full minute. Calls which lasted under one minute were recorded as one minute.

Unscheduled meetings included a variety of

interactions. Any meeting not on the calendar when the day began fell into this category. The longer unscheduled meetings were usually pre-scheduled during the same day. Often several brief meetings followed one another. When this occurred, each interaction was counted separately. These interactions included meeting with secretaries regarding work, drop-in visits to the office by graduate students and faculty, advice and direction to the graduate assistants who work directly for the chair, and visits from administrators or others within the university. It was not uncommon for several of these meetings to take place sequentially. For example during one twenty minute period the following contacts occured: A graduate student came to ask for advice on his program of studies, the chair's secretary appeared to discuss travel arrangements, a professor brought in a paper to be perused, another professor came by to discuss changes in the new Ph.D. program, the dean's secretary brought a memo to be signed, and several people gathered and discussed changes in the summer schedule. Each of these separate interactions was counted as an unscheduled meeing.

Tours were deliberate attempts on the part of the chair to leave his office and make himself available to those who wished to talk with him. On a typical tour the chair stopped at several offices of faculty and graduate

assistants. These sometimes took on the character of the unscheduled meeting with information being exchanged, advice sought and received from all parties involved, and decisions made. The difference between a tour and an unscheduled meeting is that the meetings typically take place within the inner office or outer office, while tours take place outside of the immediate work area and are initiated by the chair. One typical tour included discussions with one professor, three graduate students, two secretaries and the associate dean.

Desk work was defined as any activities which the chair performed while sitting or standing at his desk. This included reading, filing and routing mail, making lists of things to do, noting calendar changes, writing rough drafts of memos. Occasionally he wrote a position paper or longer work but, as is shown in the results, interuptions generally made this difficult or impossible during working hours.

Mintzberg discovered that the nature of managerial work is brief, varied, and fragmented. Results of this study showed that the work of the department chair is no different. The fragmented nature of that work, is presented in table 1.

Table 1

Average amount of time in minutes spent in each incident

	*Average Day for Department Chair	Executives in Mintzberg Study
Scheduled Meetings	50	68
Unscheduled Meetings	7	12
Phone Calls	4	6
Tours	9	11
Desk Work	9	15

*The average day figure comes from averaging six days considered average by the department chair, January 11, 12, 16 and February 1, 6, and 8.

Results

Length of individual incidents

Table 1 compares the average amount of time spent on each incident within the five coded activities. Only the six observation days which were considered to be average by the department chair were used in this calculation. A comparison with the executives in Mintzberg's study shows that there is similarity between the administrative work of the department chair and that of the executive. The department chair's day appears to be even more fragmented with each incident more brief that that of the executives in Mintzberg's studies.

Table 1 also illustrates one of the chief frustrations of academics who attempt to perform the administrative role. The average amount of uninterrupted time at desk work is very limited. The "typical day" average is nine minutes per time at the desk. This is in direct conflict with the long periods of unterrupted thinking required by academic work. This frustration was clearly indicated in interviews with the subject of the study and other academic department chairs. One stated that his research had been so badly neglected in his five years as chair that he had to take a sabbatical leave to get back on

course. The subject of the study continues to research and write but only by completing his scholarly work in his home office outside of work time at night and on weekends. He attempts to reserve one half-day per work week at home to research and write but finds that it is very difficult to set this time aside from the office work. On one such work day, the chair kept a time log. He was able to complete 365 minutes or over 6 hours of writing during that day. He spent some time on the phone to the office and approximately one and one-half hours present at the university. That night between 7:00 and 9:30 pm he attended a scheduled meeting with a graduate student regarding a dissertation topic.

Because of the nature of the students in the department, these night meetings are not uncommon. Since the department offers courses only after 4:00 pm, any teaching that the subject does is outside of his regular work day. He finds that he is unable to prepare for class during the work day unless he makes a very definite effort to do so.

This adverse effect on research and scholarship is mentioned in the literature. Smart and McLaughlin (1985) studied chemistry chairs to see what the effect chairing the department had on their scholarship. Results showed that the productivity of those who

served as chair was down during the administrative term. Lyon (1987) found that no matter how conscientious the new chairs intended to be and how hard they tried to balance the roles of professor and department chair, they found that the demands on the department chair are such that professorial interests, concerns, and research must be put on a lower priority during the term of office.

The fragmentation of the day was a frustration to the subject of the study and the interviewees. One found that it sometimes caused him to react in a fragmented way to genuine personal concerns.

The fragmentation of the day was increased in the case of the subject of the study because his department had many connections to public school educators, he was frequently called to speak at professional meetings and workshops. This took him from the office which caused days back in the office to be even more hectic. He stated that: "It is a half-time job, but it takes time-and-a-half to do it."

Time concerns weigh heavily on all department chairs. In a study on university faculty stress, four of the six top stressors for department chairs regarded shortage of time. They were: "having insufficient time to keep abreast of current developments in my field",

"trying to complete reports and other paperwork on time," "feeling that I have too heavy a work load, one that I cannot finish during normal work day", and "attending meetings which take up too much time." (Gmelch & Seedorf, 1988)

Percentage of day spent in each activity

Time spent in scheduled meetings is not usually rewarding to university department chairs. Table 2 shows the percentage of time in each day which is spent on the various activities.

Table 2

Percent of the day spent on each type of activity*

	**Average Day for Department Chair	Executives in Mintzberg Study
Scheduled Meetings	47	59
Unscheduled Meetings	22	10
Phone Calls	6	6
Tours	9	3
Desk Work	15	22

*The percentage figure comes from dividing the total number of minutes spent in each activity by the total number of minutes observed.

**Same as Table 1

Table 2 compares the percentage of the day spent in each of the five coded activities. A comparison with the executives in Mintzberg's study shows that the executives spent a larger proportion of the day in scheduled meetings (59%) than did the chair. The percentage for the chair was 47. Adding together the percentages of the day spent on meetings, both scheduled and unscheduled reveals that both the academic department chair and the executives spent an identical percentage of the time (69%) in meetings. Over two thirds of the day is spent in formal and informal meetings. The amount of time in scheduled meetings is a frustration for the chairs involved in the study. One comment indicated that a day with over 50 percent of the time scheduled was a lost day. Another said that nothing tangeable comes from meetings, often they only generate additional work. Another really cherishes the days when there are no scheduled meetings. A study by McLoughlin, Montgomery, and Malpass (1975) found that the linkage tasks which include the linkage of the department to other university organizations produced a zero relationship between reported enjoyability and required effort.

The amount of time spent on phone calls by academic department chairs and Mintzberg's studied

executives is also the same (6%). Seventy-five percent of the time of managers in both studies is accounted for by meetings and telephone calls. The remaining 25% is apportioned differently. The subject of the present study spends 9% of his time on tours while the subjects of Mintzberg's study used only 3% of their time in this way. This difference could be a function of managerial style. The department chair in this study believes in managing by walking around.

Mintzberg's managers spent 22 percent of their time in deskwork while the subject of the study spent only 15 percent of his time at his desk. This reflects that he took nearly all of his academic work and some office work to his home office and completed it outside of the workday.

Conclusions

The subject of this study is unique because he does little academic writing or class preparation during the hours he spends at his university office. Yet a study of his time allocation is valuable because it offers a comparison between the administrative duties of a department chair and those of chief executive officers such as those studied by Mintzberg. Results show that administration and management tasks are similar whether they are conducted by chief

executive officers of a major consulting firm, a hospital manager, or a department chair in academia. The work is brief, varied, and fragmented, and is essentially that of communication.

For the academic department chair, however, this work is only part of the job description. He or she is also responsible for publishing and keeping current in the field. Research studies show that academic productivity falls during the term as chair and that, as academics, chairs want to keep up with their fields. As the subject of this study said: "I would be content being a full-time department chair if there was not the pressure to teach and publish, but then I wouldn't be a 'professor' which is why I'm in higher education. It is all enjoyable but at times I begin to feel overwhelmed."

This study has implications for those who are not yet chairpersons. Many new chairs hope that the position will be challenging and provide many leadership opportunities. A realistic look at the actual work performed by the chair, its effect on scholarly productivity, and the frustrations of the role may help in self selection of chairs.

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